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ABSTRACT

Gangs are no longer the exclusive problem of large metropolitan areas. Suburban schools and communities are now vulnerable, and the problem is spreading. To combat the problem, it is essential to overcome denial in the school and community. The case study of Chris, a junior high school student, exemplifies suburban youth gang members. Administrators, teachers, and parents are not "gang literate"; they often do not recognize the signs of gang participation, including use of certain sports products as gang emblems. Gang members typically begin as marginal, or surface members, advance to hard-core status, and may go on to be elite gang members as adults providing leadership. Actions that schools and communities can take to help combat gangs include the following: (1) take the gang problem seriously; (2) enhance community and parental involvement and knowledge about gangs; (3) develop a clear policy on gangs and make it clear that school is a neutral place where students must feel secure; (4) develop positive incentives to increase rewards for those who refuse gang influence; (5) educate teachers to be gang literate; (6) work with local police to develop effective communication and a good working relationship; and (7) devise strategies to involve students in afterschool activities. The threat of gangs must be taken seriously from elementary school through high school. (Contains 10 references.) (SLD)

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GANGS A SUBURBAN PROBLEM TOO!

"TAKING THE GANG THREAT SERIOUSLY"

by Michael J. Stabile

Chris, a fourteen year old Jr. High student, is a "hard-core" member of a street gang. He shows, in his young face, the hardness and distrust toward established authority. His rebellion has been exhibited in total disregard for the school and school rules; he defies school officals with a cynical disposition. He wears his colors, insignias, draws gang signs and lettering on his school papers, and now a truant. He is a natural leader and students are drawn to his charismatic personality. So much so that his presence in school will cause fringe students to be drawn into misbehavior to get his attention or win his approval. Chris not only draws attention at school, but he is wanted by the police and has already missed court dates for community problems. His father, a widower, hangs his head with the shame and inability to control his sons actions or behavior. He feels the pressure and hurt of losing a son to the life of the streets. Chris has been known to leave home for days without a word of his whereabouts and brags of his exploits. He is a boy, but living the life of a gang bangger! You might ask, is this a profile of a gang member from the inner city of Los Angeles, Chicago, or New York? The answer: no; this is a profile of a student at *Washington Jr. High School* in **Chicago Heights**, a southern suburb of Chicago. Youth gangs are no

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longer the exclusive problem of large metropolitan areas. Suburban communities are vulnerable, as well as, schools. *Gang activity is something schools must watch and be willing to proactively deal with, because the problem is spreading and clearly serious.* This paper will focus on three very important questions: 1.) **What is the Problem?, 2.) What are the Elements of a gang?, and 3.) What do we do about gangs?.**

As a Dean of Students, at a Jr. High School, the issue of gangs is a problem that I have to deal with on a daily basis and aroused my heart to research and to give my time and effort to reach young men like Chris. My concern, as we examine this problem, is that we realize that it is **not just a community problem or a school problem, but it is our problem!**

WHAT IS THE PROBLEM?

First, we must overcome denial in the community and the school that the gang problem is either non-existent or that it is not very serious. Ronald Stephens, executive director of the National School Safety Center, uses this line to emphasize the point that no school system is immune to gangs and gang violence; *"Coming soon, to a neighborhood near you."*[1] Stephens, who's helped school systems across the U.S. develop programs to identify and thwart gang activity, in fact reports that today's gang threat is more than media hype. *"Going*

beyond copycat groups sophisticated and often violent, drug-marketing operations, gangs are a significant threat to the safety and well-being of U.S. schools and communities"[2] Irving Spergel, professor of sociology at the University of Chicago supports this: *"Gang activity is something schools must watch. It's clearly a problem, it's clearly spreading, and clearly serious.*[3] Spergel, who recently completed a study of gang activity in 45 U.S. cities. He points out that gangs have spread from central cities to the suburbs and smaller towns and to different regions of the country. We must be honest and admit that the potential for gangs and gang activity exists especially when ethnic and racial change occurs. Denying gangs or gang activity will increase vulnerability. We can not put a higher priority on appearance or reputation with the public than on preventing gangs. I believe that when schools don't play it straight and honest with the community you can lose your most powerful force and ally in the fight against gangs.

Secondly, most administrators, teachers, and parents aren't gang literate. *"Typically, though, the early warnings are lost on school people and parents who simply aren't gang literate. School people didn't grow up with the gang mentality.*[4] The challenge facing school people and parents is to stay current and learn to recognize the signs gangs send out. These can include things like; gang-related colors, clothing and hair styles, as well as graffiti. The use of certain

sporting products such as shoes, hats, Starter jackets, sweatpants have been used by gangs as to be sources of gang affiliation. *"What is baffling, however, is the strength of certain sporting products as icons for drug dealers and gangs. In Boston, the Greenwood street gang wears Green Bay Packer garb, the Vamp Hill Kings wear Los Angeles Kings and Raider gear, the Castlegate gang wears Cincinnati Reds Clothes. The Intervale gang uses all Adidas stuff, exclusively- hats, jackets, sweatpants, and shoes".*[5] Michael Green a former member of the Crips one the nations most notorious youth gangs states this about dress: *"I used to wear British Knights. To us BK on the side of the shoe stood for Blood Killer. I heard somebody might come out with a new shoe called Christian Knights, so the Bloods will wear them. The CK would stand for Crip Killer. If kids had these shoes, went into the wrong neighborhood and were seen by a rival gang, they could get killed. In Los Angeles, if you wore a Dallas Cowboy jacket, you were a Crip. If you wore a Washington Redskin jacket you were a Blood. It was the same with hats. Kids got killed over them.*[6] The school and community must become aware of the myriad of gang symbols and paraphernalia. Street gangs have a language all of their own, and they will test your ablility to understand it. The greatest victory a gang member can score in a school is to walk by a teacher or administrator flaunting gang colors, hand signs, or even gestures and come away

unnoticed or unscathed. This type of ignorance sends a clear message. It tells gang members your school is vulnerable to their territorial battles. The problem of denial and gang illiteracy must be addressed before schools are jeopardized by multiplying gang influence.

WHAT ARE THE ELEMENTS OF A GANG?

Charla Waxman, Clinical Coordinator of Charter Barclay Hospital's Second Floor Adolescent Program, states that there are three types of gang members: 1.] Marginal, 2.] Hardcore, and 3.] Elite.

The Marginal or "surface players" range in age from 7 to 13 years old. " *These are the kids who run with the gang and begin to identify themselves with the gang, do small favors for the gang and test the waters of membership*."[7] The Marginal members make up about approximately 50% of the gang. *"They are adolescents who have low self-esteem, loose family ties and little or no money. They are afraid because they can't travel from home to school without crossing gang boundaries and being accosted by gang members. For the most part, the gang provides protection, stability and a sense of belonging to these kids who feel helpless and hopeless.*[8] Marginal members may be asked to prove their loyalty to the gang by stealing or running drugs and guns. Many are given beepers to alert drug drops or to be used as decoys, for which they are paid by the gang $20 and up

or given expensive top of the line sneakers or sports wear.

When a marginal member advances, he becomes a "Hard-core" member. The Hard-core members follow the directives of the Elite and transmit those directives to the marginal members. They range in age from 12 to 20 years old and comprise approximately 40% of the gang. *"These are the adults and kids who live, eat, and breathe for the gang. They will die for the gang. They have no remorse for their victims and their victims may be inside the gang.*[9] The following pledge and prayer was found in the locker of Chris, from the opening profile. **"In the name of Jesus Christ our Lord and Savior blessed are we the Almighty Latin Count Nation. For we are the "Brothers" chosen to Love, Honor, Sacrifice, Understand, and Obey the Word of God. May the sun shine on us to "C" the Light of our Lord Jesus. Protect and guide us to the Land of the Almighty God. Amen"**

"Armor of a Latin Count: Black---peace of mind, body and soul, Red---the blood on our armor by our enemies and the blood of our "Brothers" who died for our organization, Five-point star---love, justice, freedom, peace, and the image of man." The Hard-core gang member feels a sense of identity and meaning in life that the gang has capitalized on. They are given permission, power, and protection to fill whatever voids, hurts, inadequcies,

and needs that were longing to be filled. They have a sense of belonging and self-esteem, but the road their on only leads to destruction.

The Elite members provide the leadership. They are the adults ranging in age from 25 to 55 years old. *"The strength of the elite is the hate and anger of the elite...they transmit the violence that takes place in the gang. Most important to remember is that gangs represent nothing but illegal activity and violence. The two mainstays of gang livelihood are drugs and guns.* [10] Violence is an accepted form of behavior control in the gang mentality. Many children are now or have grown up in gang families where the gang mentality is a way of life. Dr. Maalik Shabazz, of Crime Intervention Network in Chicago, states; *"Some of them were born, initiated and tattooed into the gang---We've got kids whose grandfathers and fathers are gang chieftains. I can't tell them not to get in a gang. That's their only family.* [11] The elite have control and know how to use their influence to get the younger boys to obey and follow the gang and literally use them as human shields to protect them from the law.

The recognition of gang members can be identified by turf boundaries, by using signs and symbols. The gang controls its members' lives in minute detail. The way they dress, which way to tie their shoes, or jewelry to wear, and even which foods to eat. Everything about a gang is designed to submerge the

individuals identity in the gang.

One way a gang identifies itself is by indicating a preference for the right or left side of the body. All gangs are divided up into one of two sides, left or right.

Left "People" and right "Folks" are the two distinctions into which the gangs fall in line. For example the Latin Kings are left "People", whereas, the Latin Counts are right "Folks. Although they have different chapters, names, ethnic and racial composition the gathering of gangs will have similar colors and distinctions depending upon right or left (see charts #1-2). *"If a kid begins to mark one side of his body with a bandanna, an earring in the right ear, a hat tilted to the right, a belt buckle on the right , be aware.* [12] These could be signs that could lead you to believe the kid might be in a gang. In examining the literature concerning gangs, some common warning signs of gang membership are consistently mentioned. I will summarize them in question form. Do they wear the same color clothing? Do they wear the same colors as their friends on a consistent basis? [Particular attention should be paid to colors combined with black.] Do They have an unusual amount of money? Do they seem more interested in staying out late and being with friends? Are they attending school but never in class? Are they associated with groups within the school that have constant conflicts with each other and

never can resolve their conflicts? Do they cruise certain neighborhoods and avoid others? Do they wear beepers? Do they draw gang symbols, signs, lettering on desks, homework papers, books, notebooks, etc.? These are warning signals of involvement and recruitment.

The gangs strength and appeal comes from "insignia "which gives a sense of belonging and sense of worth. The gangs are united together with a common bond that gives kids a sense of empowerment. They are banning together under a common flag, a common goal, a common need to be accepted and loved. James Kreske, crisis couselor at Thornton Township High School in Harvey, Illinois, who has travelled nation wide giving workshops and seminars of gangs, states that gangs give kids permission to be an act in an antisocial way, they give them the power to defy authority and feeling of worth, they offer protection of strength in identity and numbers. *"A gang's strength is in numbers and when you single kids out, you become more effective. When you are dealing with a gang kid, you need to strip him of his gang colors because that provides him with his identity with his strength from the gang.* [13] Gangs stress control over their member's lives and it is very important to remember the loyalty and fear that gang kids are under.

Now that we have looked at the problem and identified the elements of a gang member we need to turn our attention toward what we can do about gangs.

WHAT CAN WE DO ABOUT GANGS?

The literature suggest several things the school and community can do to combat gangs and gang influence. I will summarize them in **seven points.**

First, we must take the gang problem seriously. We must admit to the potential for the problem in our schools. Most schools have a group of students who remain on the outside of school life. They may be limited academically and athletically, and they spend a lot of time hanging out looking for things to do. They are very vulnerable to whatever influence comes their way. The gang attraction is an antidote to their boredom. *"There is just one thing and only one thing that school districts should do when they see just the barest suggestion of a gang problem. And that is to come down on it like a ton of bricks, as if the problems of Los Angeles were just around the corner.* [14] An article in School safety emphasizes the reason to take gangs seriously. *"The problem with gangs is that they don't grow arithmetically, they grow geometrically,... and nothing is worth jeopardizing your entire educational system...schools in Los Angeles that have gang problems barely function, and that can happen so quickly.* [15]

Second, there must be community and parental involvement. Parent support is critical to eliminating gang influence in schools. Parents have a tendency to

rationalize unacceptable behavior that the kids are going through a stage or they are just playing around with it and they will grow out of it. No parent wants to admit that their son or daughter may be caught-up in gang activity, however, such excuses can allow gang activity to thrive. Anthony Moriarty in his article,"Youth Gangs aren't just a Big-City Problem Anymore", states; *"...parent education is one of the most neglected areas of gang prevention. Parents have to learn to recognize the early signs of gang involvement, too, but so far many schools have been reluctant to take responsibility for spreading the word. Providing parent education sessions is an excellent tactical move. Not only do such sessions help build alliances between school and community, but they help parents become more perceptive, especially during early stages of gang involvement.* [16] School officals should also recognize that community support is essential. The community leadership is a powerful force. The school must recognize that communication with the community must be honest and straightfoward and look to involve them into antigang efforts. The literature emphasizes this fact; *"In our experience most communities will judge school officals as perceptive and enlightened if they address the issue of suburban gangs before schools have a problem. School officals also are more likely to obtain community support for their antigang efforts if they accurately apprise community leaders about the seriousness of the*

*phenomenen before any problem occurs.*17

Third, there must a clear policy on gangs developed. *"School policies should state that the school will not tolerate gang symbols, paraphernalia, or any communication in gang language.*[18] Some of the literature recommends adopting a policy that makes any display of gang colors in the school cause for explusion, however, it would be prudent to consult with an attorney before quickly moving to that type of posture. School policy must be clear and present a serious threat for gang members intent on territorial markings, recruitment, and intimidation. Policies that are clear, let gang members know they must leave their colors at the door if they are to come to this school. The school must be a safe place and a neutral place were students feel secure. An example of such a policy is taken from the Rich Township High Schools Student Handbook:

"Street gangs, satanic cults, and related activity are not acceptable in the school setting. The wearing of gang insignia or satanic cult paraphernalia or symbols, "flashing" gang signs, drawing gang and satanic cult symbols, distribution of gang or satanic cult literature, the use of gang "threats" and related gang and satanic activities are prohibited. In addition, only those student groups that have been approved by Student Council and campus administration are permitted the use of school facilities for meetings and/or activities. The

disposition for violation of these rules will include a parent conference and may also result in:

a. up to a ten-day out-of-school suspension; and

b. recommendation to the Board of Education for explusion, if circumstances warrant."

Fourth, develop positive incentives to increase rewards for those who refuse gang influence. The school policy enforcement should severly penalize students who affiliates with a gang, however, schools should increase the reward for those who resist the gang influence. At **Washington Jr. High School**, we have developed an incentive program to encourage students who are demonstrating positive behavior as part of the **"Dean's List Program"**. The literature also suggests that students who exhibit leadership positively and make them feel useful in the school and that their leadership is valued and important. Recognition and a sense of status develops an atmosphere where students believe they are important to the school. It is also important to identify potential leadership from even the marginal students or fringe groups and try to get them involved to the greater good of the school. In one article, the advice was to target students very early, especially grades 3 to 5 . The idea is to catch them at a very pliable time in life and make kids aware of gangs and build in them a positive self-image, self-

management skills, and communication skills. *"We got away from the affective side of education, the feelings and attitudes and values, and got too much into cognitive because we had to improve test scores....But in order for the cognitive to hold, kids have to think, 'Hey, I can do that math, I know I can."* [19]

Fifth, we must educate our teaching staff to be gang literate. Teachers need to be made aware and stay current in learning to recognize gang activity in students and gang activity. In-services, release time to attend workshops and seminars are well spent investments to the future of our schools. *"Young people are not likely to flaunt gang symbols and other identifiers in the presence of knowledgeable teachers. Gangs thrive on ignorance, and that means knowledge is the teacher's most effective asset.* [20]

Sixth, schools must work with local police to develop effective communication and working relationship. The local police department has a wealth of information about crime in the community and the latest trends among local street gangs[i.e. colors, type of dress, etc.]. Another advantage is that local police might be available to provide security and liasion services in the school. Rich East High School in Park Forest, Illinois has developed a school-police liason program in their school that has had great success.

Seventh, the school should devise strategies to involve students in after

school activities. The literature indicates that to address the needs of marginal students who might be vulnerable to gangs, you must devise ways to keep students involved after regular school hours. Many are students who fall through the cracks. They aren't athletes, they are not likely to be involved in the traditional activities or clubs. These are kids who are all alone after school and on their own. Many come form single-parent families; their parents work long hours and are not home to help supervise after school activity. *"For example, Rich East High School runs a daily 30 minute tutorial period, during which teachers must be in their rooms and no activities may begin."*[21] This program is after school and provides some structure and added relationship for those who would just leave after school. I believe you have to seek kids out and provide some type of environment that has structure, gives them a sense of belonging or identity. Teachers with imaginative creative ability could use after school time to build powerful bonds between students and utilize their potential. I also, recognize teacher time, effort, and willingness to invest their time. However, if we really do love kids, there will be those willing to make such commitments and investments in lives.

In conclusion, I have tried to focus our attention to what I believe one of the biggest problems and challenges we will have to meet in suburban schools; gangs. This paper addressed three focused questions: What is the problem?, What

are the elements of a gang?, and What can we do about gangs?. The literature was researched to answer these questions as well as my personal experience dealing with the gang issue. Several strategies were mentioned and outlined for dealing with the gang problem. My intent in this paper was not to give detailed analysis of types of gangs and what certain type of gangs look like or even wear. My purpose was to stir-up the reader to a realization that street gangs are a very real problem in suburban schools. They are not high school problems only, but reach to the Jr. High and even the elementary school level. It is my intention for anyone reading this paper to use it as a motivator to get school people, parents, and the community at large, aware and willing to do something about this issue. If it means policy change, administrative involvement, teacher involvement, parent involvement, police involvement, and community involvement the future of our children and the climate of our schools are at risk. **What we do with this generation of children will greatly effect the type of society that proceeds it! We must take the threat of gangs seriously!**

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FOOTNOTES

1.Anthony Moriarity, "Youth Gangs aren't just a big-city problem anymore", The Executive Educator, (July 1990). p14.

2.Ibid, p.14.

3.Ibid, p.14.

4.Ibid, p.15

5."Sensless in America's Cities", Sports Illustrated. (May 14, 1990). p.43.

6.Ibid, p 43.

7."Insight into Gang Culture", Charter Barclay Hospital Symposium. (Fall 1988). p.1.

8.Ibid, p.1.

9.Ibid, p.1.

10.Ibid, p10.

11.Alex Poinsett, "Why our Children are Killing One Another", Ebony (December, 1987). p.90.

12.Ibid, p 91.

13."Insight Into Gang Culture", p.2

14.Ibid. p.2

15.Suzanne Harper, "What Can We do About Gangs", School Safety. p.14.

16.Anthony Moriarity, p.16.

17.Ibid, p.16.

18.Ibid, p.15.

19.Suzanne Harper, p14.